FORT PILAR & THE JESUITS IN ZAMBOANGA

The earliest presence of Jesuit missionaries in Zamboanga was in 1585, when Fr. Diego del Rosario established a mission at *La Caldera*, Recodo today. A Spanish garrison had earlier been established there in 1569. Through the years, other settlements spread throughout the islands. Because of the pirate raids in the Visayas coming from Mindanao, the authorities decided to build a fort at *Cagang-Cagang*, Rio Hondo today, to guard the waters of Basilan Strait.

Under the command of Capitan Juan Chavez, 300 Spaniards and 1,000 Visayans landed in Zamboanga on April 6, 1635, together with Jesuit missionaries Melchor de Vera and Pedro Gutierrez, the founder of Dapitan. Under the supervision of Fr. de Vera, construction of the fort begun on June 23, 1635, which marks the foundation day of the city. In 1637, the Jesuits began classes in Spanish, religion, reading and arithmetic for children, as well as informal classes on Church doctrine for adults.

A 1734 map drawn by Fr. Pedro Murillo Velarde titled *Samboangan* shows the fort and its surroundings. The caption below it says, "*1. Col. dela Comp. de JHS 2. Casa del Gov. 3. Pozo de Agua Dulce. 4. Almacenes. 5. Cuerpo de guardia. 6. Capilla. 7. Cuarteles. 8. Hospital.*" The *almacenes* was the warehouse or ammunition magazine. Nos. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 are quartered inside the fort. The government house and hospital are inside a big compound in front of the fort, while the *colegio* is behind the government house. Note that No. 1 is the *Colegio dela Compania de JHS*, or School of the Company of Jesus.

The intermarriage between the Spaniards, Visayans and the native population of Sama-Lutaos (floating people) and Subanons (river people) who settled around the fort became the original population of what was to become Zamboanga. The Chavacano language evolved from the union of these different cultures.

There are different explanations about the name of Zamboanga. The 1734 Murillo map is named "Samboangan," after the *sambuan* or *saguan*, Malay for oar or paddle. It is the Sinama word for "anchorage or mooring place," the stake to which boats are tied. This version sounds very plausible, because many names of places in our 7,000-island Philippines are related to water.

Subanon is *suba* and *non* or river people. Tausug is *tao* and *suug*, people of the current. Maranao comes from *ranao* or lake. Tagalog is *taga ilog,* from the river. Manila came from *may nilad* or there is nilad, a mangrove flowering shrub. Cebu was originally *sugbu*, Cebuano for "to walk in shallow waters." Albay is *al baybay,* "by the shore" in Spanish and Bikol. Agusan is Manobo for "where the water flows." Pampanga is from *pampang* or river bank. Laguna is Spanish for lake or lagoon.

Another version of the name of Zamboanga says it was named after the *sambon*, an herbal plant. A more recent and arguable version is "Jambangan," the land of flowers. Decades ago, some visiting Indonesians said *jambangan* means flowers to them. This fitted the title of Zamboanga as the City of Flowers (until the 1960s) and the term was promoted for tourism purposes, only to find out later that the word really means a flower vase or pot. Anyway, today the flowers of Zamboanga have been replaced by thousands of tricycles and motorcycles congesting the city, and everyone knows that Baguio is unquestionably the City of Flowers.

The fort was originally named the *Fuerza Real de San Jose*, the Royal Fort of St. Joseph. It was attacked by the Dutch in 1646 and abandoned in 1663. Reconstructed in 1666, it was rededicated to *Nuestra Señora del Pilar de Zaragoza* in 1719.

The story of Our Lady of the Pillar of Zaragoza goes back to the first century of Christianity, how the apostle St. James (*Santiago*) went to Spain to spread Christianity. One day he was a little discouraged at his missionary efforts and praying by the Ebro River when he saw angels bringing Mary to a pillar. She then comforted and encouraged him to continue his work and to build a church at that place. Today a beautiful church stands there in memory of her appearance.

It is this Marian scene of St. James by the Ebro River that devotees contemplate in prayer down the centuries every time they visit the shrine to light their candles. Once upon a time the only candles sold there were white and something else. Today they sell all kinds of colors for all kinds of saints or intentions, even black for San Vicente Ferrer, San Martin de Porres or for driving out evil spirits. The makers, sellers and devotees of these candles do not need the guidance of Church authorities to make the road to heaven a color-coded one, just like today's traffic rules.

The image of the *Virgen del Pilar* was originally installed as a frontispiece over the main gate in January 1734. The main gate was eventually sealed sometime before 1860 and turned into a shrine in Mary's honor. Inside the fort is the Zamboanga Museum, accessible through a side entrance.

In January 1900, the Americans renamed the shrine Fort Pilar and the name has stayed to this day. It is probably "the only military stronghold in the world that has become a Marian shrine for prayer, peace and dialogue."

The location of Fort Pilar is very significant. It is situated between the Christian homes of the city and the Muslim homes of Rio Hondo, a symbolic bridge linking the two inter-religious cultures of Zamboanga. The town fiesta of Zamboanga is the *Fiesta Pilar* celebrated every year on October 12.

Until the 1990s, the shrine used to be an open-air unfenced area that welcomed everyone, no matter what faith they professed. There is an account of Muslim women lighting candles and devotedly praying at the shrine. There is also the story of a Muslim baby girl at Sinunuc, who miraculously survived after a coconut tree fell on their house during a big storm. Her parents attributed this to Our Lady of Pilar and in gratitude named her Pilar.

Miriam in Hebrew or Maryam in Aramaic or Arabic, the mother of Isa or Jesus, is mentioned in the Qur'an 34 times, much more frequently than in the Gospels. She is "*Sayyida*" (Lady in Arabic) to the Muslims, who would even come from Jolo to pay their respects. This has reportedly stopped when a fence topped by statues of Catholic saints was put up around the shrine years ago.

Today the entrance into the fort and the museum inside is through a small side gate, next to a plaque of the Philippines Historical Committee, which states: "*Founded as southern outpost of Spanish domain under the supervision of Melchor de Vera, 1635; attacked by the Dutch, 1646; deserted when troops were concentrated in Manila to drive away Chinese pirates, 1663; reconstructed by the Society of Jesus, 1666; rebuilt under the management of Juan Sicarra, 1719; stormed by Dalasi, king of Bulig with 3,000 Moros, 1720; cannonaded by the British, 1798; witnessed the mutiny of seventy prisoners, 1872; abandoned by the Spaniards, 1898; occupied by the Americans under General JC Bates, 1899; seized by the Japanese, 1942; taken over by the Republic of the Philippines, 4 July 1946.*"

A 2009 address of Fr. Adolfo Nicolas, Superior General of the Society of Jesus, reminded us that "one of the favorite words from General Congregation 35 that has captured the imagination of so many Jesuits and friends in mission is *frontiers*… A challenging frontier for Jesuit education is to be a more universal education in the Ignatian sense of breadth of belonging and wideness of concern and responsibility… The prestige that attaches to our schools, the fame of the 'Jesuit brand' of education may tempt us to make our schools a new but still narrow base for belonging, which we use to distinguish and separate ourselves from others" (*Challenges and Issues in Jesuit Education,* CIJE).

Fort Pilar and most of Zamboanga occupy what used to be swampy land in those frontier days. A recent excavation at the Immaculate Conception Cathedral next door to the Ateneo de Zamboanga along La Purisima Street exposed long-buried nipa roots. The Ateneo is about one kilometer inland from Fort Pilar.

Those nipa roots of old also remind us of the roots and foundation of Ignatian spirituality found in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. These exercises are ways to bring us to God through a process of discernment as a contemplative in action. They invite us to know, love and follow Jesus more fully, be a contemplative in action, and learn to find God in all things. Finding God in all things means we seek God not only in fixed religious, liturgical and devotional ways, because "God is above and beyond all our means and methods," in the words of St. Ignatius.

Through the centuries, many beliefs and practices become part of our traditions. They can obscure or hide the true story of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. It is inevitable that human nature's focus on the self will result in additions and subtractions (*dagdag-bawas*) to our faith, with personal intentions or superstitious beliefs crowding out the call to selfless and humble service to others. Our Marian devotions and our present-day ministries must be rooted in the original spirit of Jesus Christ and St. Ignatius of Loyola, so that we will continue to bring good and effective news to those we serve.

The Spanish missionaries first arrived in Zamboanga in 1585, only 45 years after the Society of Jesus was founded by St. Ignatius in Rome in 1540. Since then, the Jesuit presence in this area has remained to this day, except for two periods. The first was from 1663 to 1666, when the garrison was abandoned and sent to help defend Manila from Chinese pirates. The second period was from 1769 to 1863, when the Jesuits were expelled and officially suppressed in the Church because of Church-State politics.

Forty years later, the political climate had changed and petitions calling for the return of the Jesuits began to spread. On August 7, 1814 Pope Pius VII restored the Society of Jesus in the Church. The Jesuits returned to the Philippines in 1859 and in 1863 Fr. Ramon Barua established the first Jesuit parish in Mindanao at Tetuan.

In 1912 a parochial school of the Immaculate Conception Parish was established by Fr. Manuel Sauras. In 1916 it became the Ateneo de Zamboanga. The pre-World War II Ateneo and Cathedral occupied an entire block across Plaza Pershing and City Hall, the present site of the Universidad de Zamboanga.

After the war, Fr. Eusebio Salvador, the first Zamboangueño Jesuit and director of the school, transferred both school and church to its present location. He is considered the second founder of the Ateneo de Zamboanga. 2012 is the Ateneo's Centennial Year and it is the host of the 2nd Jesuit Basic Education Congress.

Decree 2 of the General Congregation 35 of the Society of Jesus in 2008 is entitled "A Fire That Kindles Other Fires," and the subtitle is "Many Sparks, One Fire. Many Stories, One History." This aptly describes the apostolic work of the Jesuits in Mindanao and in the Archdiocese of Zamboanga.

"The Society of Jesus has carried a flame for nearly five hundred years through innumerable social and cultural circumstances that have challenged it intensely to keep that flame alive and burning. Things are no different today. In a world that overwhelms people with a multiplicity of sensations, ideas, and images, the Society seeks to keep the fire of its original inspiration alive in a way that offers warmth and light to our contemporaries. It does this by telling a story that has stood the test of time, despite the imperfections of its members and even of the whole body, because of the continued goodness of God, who has never allowed the fire to die."

Today the Jesuits continue to serve the archdiocese and city of Zamboanga through the Ateneo de Zamboanga University. After turning over all their parishes in Zamboanga to the Claretian Missionary Fathers in 1956, the Jesuits continued their parish work in the mission district of Zamboanga del Sur for five decades more.

The Jesuit presence in Zamboanga for over 400 years is evidenced by the names of some places – the San Ignacio bridge in front of the KCC Mall de Zamboanga, the Pasonanca road and the main Ateneo campus named after Fr. Eusebio Salvador, and the street of the St. Ignatius Parish at Tetuan named after its founder Fr. Ramon Barua. There is a recent Villa San Ignacio subdivision near the Ateneo High School in Tumaga. Not to be forgotten is Fr. Melchor de Vera, the Jesuit who supervised the construction of Fort Pilar in 1635 and whose name is engraved in the plaque of the Philippine Historical Committee at Fort Pilar.

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